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ABM

Defense Structure: A Big Controversy

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SHORTLY BEFORE the Mideast crisis flared into war, a critical Senator questioned Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara about the peril of "another Vietnam" and the lack of available reserves. McNamara responded with more than his customary cool assurance. Nonsense, he said, there is no such lack. In typical McNamara fashion he proceeded to tick off the uncommitted reserves that could be sent to the Mideast should the need arise. These ready reserves are in addition to the 250,000 American troops in Germany and the 445,000 in Vietnam.

The Secretary bases a lot of his calm, cool confidence on what has been done during the nearly six and a half years of his overlordship in the Pentagon in increasing the ready reserves. The increase is not merely in numbers but in the ability to fly ready forces to any given point in the globe.

AS CRISIS piles on crisis the Secretary's cool is even more conspicuous in the frenetic atmosphere of meeting following upon meeting. Behind the big desk in the office that looks out across the Potomac and to the Capitol beyond he is a kind of admiral of the seven seas. The controls are in the top-secret documents so neatly arrayed and in the posture statement—the compilation of aims, objectives, capabilities—put together each year that becomes the Defense Department's bible until it is replaced by another thick volume.

While his close friends intimate from time to time that he has reservations about the escalation of the Vietnam war there is not the slightest evidence of this in his public front. His unflappability is, above all, in his own conviction of the consistent course he charts. Despite interpretations — misinterpretations, he would say — that he has changed his position on the antiballistic missile, he sees no change in what he put in the posture statement.

Since this is the biggest controversy in the whole vast defense structure, it is well to try to clarify the Secretary's position. He opposed in January and continues to oppose a broad plan to protect American cities from a massive Soviet missile attack. He shows by complex calculation and computerization to his own satisfaction, and to the satisfaction of an increasing number of his critics on Capitol Hill, that this is an impossibility.

It is also an impossibility for the Soviets to protect their cities from an American retaliatory strike. Therefore, in the McNamara view, an agreement between the two nuclear giants to forgo building an antiballistic missile system is not essential. Such an agreement might be desirable as part of a broad relaxation of tensions. But the ABM system being built around Moscow has no significance in the over-all context of the relative strength of the two powers.

BUT McNAMARA is coming around to the view that a thin missile defense system as a protection against Red China's nuclear potential in the mid-'70s may be necessary. While there is nothing in the budget for the next fiscal year for this purpose, the Secretary is convinced that there is ample lead time in relation to China's atomic capability. In short, he takes a less alarmist view than those who say that by the end of 1967 China will have 60 to 70 weapons, roughly equivalent to the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a capability of dropping those bombs on neighboring nations with only a slight modification of bombers now in Red China's air force.

Is the thin missile defense a foot in the door, as some critics have suggested, that will eventually mean a full-scale cities program? No, McNamara says emphatically. He is, of course, prepared to increase America's offensive missile capacity as intelligence reveals Soviet increases linked to what may or may not prove to be Moscow's determination to build a cities system.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff favor all three—the cities program, the thin system and a great step-up in offensive capacity. The difference in the McNamara price tag and that of the JCS is in the order of 10 to one—$4 billion to $40 billion.

In spite of initial fears of high-voltage emotionalism only the far-out right has sought to make the Secretary's stand on the ABM defense an issue. Unfortunately, McNamara has had to live down some unfortunate early prophecies on Vietnam. After one four-day visit to Saigon, carried away with the optimism of the current military command, he predicted American troops would begin to be withdrawn in 1965. Since those miscalculations his credibility record has been good. In his debate with the military, abetted by the extremist fringe, this record is standing him in good stead.